

ARTICLE FROM SENATOR BEV HAMMERSTROM
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ARE YOU UP TO DATE? VACCINATE!

Having just read Cokie Roberts' new book, *FOUNDING MOTHERS: THE WOMEN WHO RAISED OUR NATION*, I am still kind of reeling from the revelation of how very difficult life was for these women, and particularly how many children they bore that never reached adulthood.

Martha Washington, for example, had four children by her first husband (Daniel Parke Custis), all of whom she buried. Her first born, Daniel, died at 3 years; Daniel's sister Frances died at age 4. Daughter Patsy lived until she was 17. Only her son, Jacky, lived long enough to have children of his own - six, two of which died in infancy. Jacky himself died at a young age of "camp fever" (probably typhoid fever) just a few days after he enlisted to be an aide to his stepfather, George. Another great first lady, Martha Jefferson gave birth to six children during her short life; only two survived infancy.

Today, this is not the norm, in a large part, due to vaccines which now prevent many childhood diseases in the United States. The good news is that in our country we are at record or near record lows of vaccine-preventable childhood diseases. However, many of the viruses and bacteria are no more than a plane ride away and could resurface to infect those who are not immunized. Young parents today are less likely to be concerned about immunizations because they never lived in a time when these diseases were commonplace.

Many of us are old enough to remember polio - whether those memories are of President Franklin Roosevelt paralyzed by polio and confined to a wheelchair or simply the memories of practices during our childhood such as naps and avoidance of public swimming pools during the summer months. My generation was the first to receive the Salk vaccine in large numbers; my children received the oral polio vaccine. Because of these immunizations, natural polio has been eliminated in the United States since 1979.

As our nation was forming, however, epidemics of smallpox, yellow fever and dysentery claimed hundreds of lives. By 1977, smallpox was virtually eliminated from the face of the earth. We don't hear of yellow fever in the U.S. today, but every year there are still about 200,000 cases around the world (mostly in Africa and South America), causing roughly 40,000 deaths. Before immunizations were available for pertussis, nearly all children developed "whooping cough." In the U.S. alone, between 150,000 and 260,000 cases were reported annually with up to 9,000 pertussis-related deaths. Rates have also seriously declined for measles, meningitis, chickenpox, diphtheria, tetanus, hepatitis B and mumps - all because vaccines are readily available.

Most of these vaccine-preventable diseases are caused by viruses or bacteria. Vaccines help your body recognize and fight these germs each time you are exposed. Antibodies

stay on guard in the body for years and are an important way to keep us healthy. While most vaccines are given to babies and young children, some are needed throughout our lifetime to ensure immunity.

August is recognized annually as National Immunization Awareness Month - appropriately as parents are enrolling children in school, young adults are leaving for college and public health officials are gearing up for the flu season. The theme for this year's campaign is "Are You Up to Date? Vaccinate!" Getting vaccinated is a lifelong effort, and one needs to be aware of vaccines recommended not only for infants and children, but adolescents, adults and seniors as well. With today's easy access to world travel, those going abroad should be aware of vaccines recommended for specific countries. There is a wealth of information available on the Internet, and I urge you to peruse it.

Now, I realize that while immunizations were one of the most significant public health achievements of the 20th century, they are not without risks. I also appreciate the fact that certain religions oppose immunizations. For these reasons, Michigan law allows for exemptions in some cases for those immunizations required to enter school. However, in order to prohibit a comeback of these diseases that are under control today, we must continue to immunize the majority until we eliminate the disease completely. If we take away the protection of vaccines before a disease is completely eradicated, we will soon undo the wonderful progress we have made since the days of our Founding Mothers. I don't know about you, but I surely don't want to go backward.